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In pursuit of excellence in academic nursing: avoiding the folly of rewarding A but hoping for B

Academia has a long-held obsession with individual performance metrics and markers of esteem, and ranking people accordingly – who has the highest research grant income? The best h-index? The most prestigious fellowships and awards? Academic nursing is no exception, gleefully jumping onto the bandwagon driven, in part, by our fragile and insecure academic identity. Nursing is often viewed as a weaker and less credible discipline by academic peers (Clark and Thompson 2015). This is particularly the case in the UK, where negative perceptions around the graduate status of nursing continue to fester (Oliver 2019). Thus, we scrutinize the performance of the nursing professoriate (Watson et al 2016), and debate criteria and key indicators of excellence on which nurse academics should be judged (Rolfe 2016), in an effort to place our discipline on a surer footing within the academy.

In his recent editorial, Hayter (2019) extends this debate to nursing academics whose role encompasses teaching and scholarship (T&S), rather than teaching and research (T&R). Taking the 'industry-standard' performance metrics used in T&R careers as his point of departure (publications/grants/citation indices), Hayter argues for an analogous set of objective quantifiable measures to be developed to rate individual academic teaching performance. This, he suggests, will allow for more rigorous and transparent evaluation of

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T&S promotion cases, and ultimately enable us to unequivocally answer the question, 'who is the best teacher in your school?'.

I strongly share his view of the importance for nursing education to develop a parity of esteem between T&S and T&R academic career tracks. The distinctive career paths of nurse academics coupled with the unique demands of undergraduate nursing programmes can often mean a high proportion of a higher education institution's T&S academics are situated in schools of nursing. However, some of the suggestions for measures of individual teaching performance gave my cause for concern. Attempting to quantify 'who is the best teacher?' in my Department had never occurred to me, and left me wondering – what impact would posing such a question have on individuals' morale and effectiveness at work?

Rewarding individual outputs whilst hoping for collaboration

Collegiality – collaboration and constructive cooperation between colleagues – lies at the heart of most work we do in higher education. Success at institutional, departmental, teaching unit or research group level is strongly predicated on how effectively teams of individuals work collaboratively and share responsibility to achieve a common purpose. Nursing education is especially a team sport. In the same way that it is said to take a village to raise a child, it takes a community of clinicians, academics, administrators and support staff working in close partnership to educate someone to become a registered nurse. We establish schools of nursing with the aim of creating an environment where this collaboration can play out and flourish; to enable us to be greater than the sum of our parts. But what would happen if, within this collegial system, we establish measures of success and rewards that are based on *individual* performance and markers of esteem?

My concern is that it would lead to what Kerr (1975) described as the folly of rewarding A but hoping for B: that is, a reward system that "pays off" for one behaviour even though we

are hoping for another. In his original 1975 article, Kerr draws on Universities as a case study to exemplify the folly, observing that the "rewards" on offer for T&R academics (money, esteem, promotion) are almost entirely for research and publications ('A'), yet institutions (and society) hopes that academics will devote time to, and not neglect teaching ('B') – a paradox that higher education continues to grapple with to this day.

Kerr's example is less relevant to nursing academics on T&S career tracks, where expectations to engage in substantive research are more limited. However, a similar folly would be created by establishing a system in which people were rated according to individual teaching metrics. Rewarding academics with promotion for being rated better than those they are expected to collaborate with ("which one of us is the best?"), is clearly at odds with the hope of achieving a culture of teamwork and shared responsibility,

Just as in Kerr's case example of T&R academics neglecting their teaching, it would be rational for T&S academics to concentrate on areas where they can achieve the greatest reward and recognition, even if that is to the detriment of achieving a collective goal. If student pass rates, evaluations of individual teaching, and unannounced observations of teaching are the objective metrics of success, as posited by Hayter, what motivation is there for an individual to take on chairmanship of that difficult committee? Teach on the essential but prosaic module that students evaluate less favourably? Mentor a new member of staff? Help out with marking a few additional dissertations?

Fischer (2009) describes the special toll the disintegration of community can take on academic workplaces. Drawing on a chapter of Sutton's (2007) provocatively titled text *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't*, he argues that where collegiality is not fostered and rewarded, individuals can develop indifference and emotional detachment, put their energies into looking out for themselves, avoid blame, or do the bare minimum required – in effect, they disengage.

Defining teaching excellence – a collegial approach

Clearly, not all behaviours are motivated by external reward, and there is a pragmatic imperative to develop rigorous and transparent measures of success for teaching-focussed career tracks. Universities have expectations, performance reviews need to be undertaken, decisions around promotion and career progression made. However, it does not follow that we should therefore focus on individual outputs that enable us to identify our 'best teacher', or rank colleagues in a league table of excellence (something I am aware is common practice for research-focussed academics in some University departments),

Key to the development of measures of performance for T&S academics is ensuring that they positively reinforce a collegial ethos that is crucial to everyone's success. In contrast to Hayter, I would therefore argue that collective metrics such as course completion rates and student feedback on departmental level teaching quality *are* appropriate measures to use in individual promotion and career progression cases, if they are considered alongside evidence on an individual's collaborative contribution to these shared outcomes. To that end, we might usefully shift our focus to developing appropriate measures of collegiality for use in promotion cases (for example, see: Schmidt et al 2017). Aligning rewards with behavioural hopes/expectations would also afford greater recognition of the variety of roles, functions and responsibilities a T&S career track in nursing education can involve. Ultimately, this will support nurse academics to find what Clark and Sousa (2018) describe as the 'sweet spot' – a contribution of mutual benefit for individuals and their workplaces.

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